

## **Bullying: A Fact Sheet for Teachers and Leaders of Children and Youth**

### **What is bullying?**

“Bullying is aggressive behavior that is intentional and that involves an imbalance of power or strength. Typically it is repeated over time.”

“What we know about bullying”—a publication of U.S. Department of Health and Human Resources.

Note these three characteristics of bullying behavior:

- It is intentional.
- It is repeated.
- It involves an imbalance of power.

### **Why should I be concerned about bullying?**

- Bullying is serious. Many studies have revealed major social, educational, health, and other implications for children who bully, who are bullied, or who witness bullying (see statistics printed below).
- Bullying, from a Christian perspective, is a spiritual issue. It's about treating people as things, rather than as imagebearers of God. Bullying is about violence against and contempt for others. It creates a climate of fear, alienation, insecurity, and suspicion—negative emotions that inhibit the formation of healthy self-concepts, loving relationships, and a strong community.

### **How prevalent is bullying?**

While these statistics are derived from school studies, bullying behavior occurs wherever groups gather. You may assume that bullying statistics for church would be very similar to those found here:

- A child is bullied once every seven minutes on any given school playground, and once every twenty-five minutes in class (Pepler, et al, 1997).
- Nearly one in six children reports being victimized by bullies twice or more in the past six weeks.
- Peers are involved in some capacity in 85 percent of bullying episodes, and 48 percent of those involved actively take part in the bullying.
- Peers are significantly more likely to be respectful of bullies than of victims (74 percent supported the bullies).
- Physical bullying peaks at age eleven to twelve, but persists into high school; verbal and relational bullying is more constant.
- Adults believe they intervene more than they actually do. In one study, 70 percent of teachers said adults “almost always” intervene to stop bullying—only 25 percent of students agreed.
- Twenty-five percent of teachers see nothing wrong with bullying or putdowns, and consequently intervene in only 4 percent of bullying incidents.
- Many children do not report incidents of bullying because they fear that telling adults will only bring more harassment from bullies. They also believe that adults do little or nothing to help in bullying incidents.
- Teachers' and leaders' attitudes, behaviors, and routines play a large role in the prevalence of bullying behavior; they are also integral to successful anti-bullying programs.

### **How can I recognize bullying?**

**Verbal bullying:** taunting, name-calling, belittling, defamation, racial slurs, sexually abusive or suggestive remarks, malicious nicknames, extortion, abusive phone calls, gossip, making a child the butt of jokes.

**Physical bullying:** hitting, punching, kicking, shoving, tripping, slapping, choking, biting, scratching, twisting limbs into painful positions, spitting, damaging clothes or property.

**Relational bullying:** shunning, ignoring, isolating, excluding, spreading rumors, lies or gossip to diminish the social standing of the bullied child. These actions are often accompanied by subtle gestures such as eyerolling, sighs, frowns, sneers, snickers, and hostile body language.

**Cyber bullying:** using the latest technological tools such as e-mail, blogs, text messages, cell phones, chat rooms, and so on to hurt others (fast becoming a major issue).

## **What can teachers and leaders of children and youth do?**

### **Prevent bullying from happening:**

- Actions speak louder than words. Walk the walk. Be a caring model of Jesus' love.
- Learn all you can about bullying. A good place to start is one of the anti-bullying websites such as [www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov](http://www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov). Knowledge about the topic helps you be supportive of victims and bystanders (those who witness the bullying but don't know how to intervene).
- Since bullying usually happens away from the teacher's view, be sure to adequately supervise hallways, buses, playgrounds, activities, and outings.
- Be observant and ask questions. Targets of bullying often become withdrawn, fear going outside, or withdraw from your program altogether.
- Hold a bully accountable for his actions by following the three R's (restitution, resolution, and reconciliation).
- Establish that your group meeting is a bully-free zone; involve your children/youth in setting guidelines for a healthy and safe meeting place.
- Follow policies and procedures recommended by your education/youth/abuse prevention committees if and when you suspect that bullying is an issue for your group.

### **Help your church become a safe place of healing and spiritual growth.**

- Become an active listener. Don't dismiss or shrug off stories about bullying.
- Affirm all children's strengths and frequently give positive feedback.
- Encourage children to share their stories, and encourage healthy group discussions.
- Be a peacemaker and a mender of broken relationships within your group.
- Hold bullies accountable so that you do not deepen the pain and hopelessness of the victim.
- Find out about resources your church may have (such as counseling referrals) that will help hurting children heal; guide them to seek out these resources.

### **Nurture empathy**

The quality of empathy allows a person to enter into and identify with another person's feelings. People who empathize with others find it hard to bully.

Empathy is "caught" more than "taught." It is learned through experience, observation, and teaching strategies that encourage a child to look within and reflect on his or her own heart condition. As a teacher or leader of children in the church, you have a very unique opportunity to nurture this Christlike characteristic.

Consider these important ways of nurturing empathy:

- *Listen Actively:* Teachers and leaders who really listen and give feedback to those who talk or tell their stories encourage children to think more deeply about issues. Questions such as, "How did that make you feel?" or "I wonder why someone would do such a thing?" or "What could you do to make your friend feel happier or better?" can stimulate a child to identify with others' feelings and thoughts.
- *Practice positive discipline with a bully:* The word discipline has as its root the word for "to learn." Discipline is not primarily about punishment but more about teaching new and better ways of behaving. The process of discipline helps bullies identify what they have done wrong, gives

them ownership of problem, helps them develop a process for solving the problem, and leaves their dignity intact.

- *Emphasize the three R's with bullies:*
  - Restitution: fixing what they did, such as paying for a broken toy, giving back the extorted money, apologizing for the malicious words.
  - Resolution: figuring out a way to keep it from happening again, such as counting to ten when they're angry or recognizing the stimulus that causes the bullying behavior and deciding on a better coping mechanism.
  - Reconciliation: finding a way to heal the broken relationship.
- *Practice warm Christian love:* Teachers and leaders are living examples of Jesus' love. They model empathy and show Jesus' love when they give affection to children in appropriate ways and are helpful, polite, and interested in their personal lives.
- *Spotlight feelings:* Questions about feelings can be a part of every session; children can be encouraged to imagine the feelings of Bible characters or to voice their feelings about stories they hear or events they experience. Teachers and leaders should not feel as though they need to "fix" feelings as soon as they are expressed; allow children to be honest and help them work through to the positives.
- *Role-play:* Role play is an excellent teaching strategy that helps children identify with the feelings and ideas of others. A word of caution: warm up to role plays by involving the group in discussion along lines like these, for example: "One of the characters in this role play has just been in a minor fender-bender. What thoughts are running through his head as he jumps out of his car to inspect the damage?" Once children are well into imagining the scenario, assign roles for role play.
- *Encourage journaling or writing exercises* that focus on another person's perspective (for example, What did the little boy who gave his lunch to Jesus tell his mom when he came home?).
- *Teach about real-life people* who modeled empathy, and how this empathy resulted in great things: Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, and so on.
- *Use service projects*, especially real-life hands-on work with people who live with disabilities or poverty. Often bullies believe they are entitled to whatever they wish; working for others and learning about their lives often gives us new attitudes about ourselves.
- *Practice empathetic reactions:* Present a hypothetical problem situation a child might encounter (for example, a friend's parents have divorced or another friend's grandmother is dying). Discuss these questions together:
  - What's the bad thing that happened?
  - How is this person feeling about what happened?
  - What can I do in response?
- *Praise positive behavior:* Catch kids doing good and reinforce that behavior, instead of harping on the negatives.
- *Provide opportunities for fellowship and friendship:* Parties, celebrations, projects, eating together, pen-pal relationships, and other such relational activities are warm and nurturing antidotes to negatives, and may fill up the holes in both a bully's and a target's life.

**Taken from *Preventing Child Abuse: creating a safe place, Appendix C, 2009*. Used with permission of author Beth A. Swagman and Faith Alive Christian Resources.**